

Iraq Is The Wolf We're Holding By The Ears

By JOHN B. LARSON

The president has been enthusiastic in his support of elections that took place in Iraq today and continues to be optimistic regarding the overall situation there.

Yet the world and many here at home are skeptical. The administration's decision to hand-pick the governing council and the intensity of the insurgents have created serious doubt — particularly in the Arab world — that there can be a valid election.

Iraq is near anarchy, with attacks on Iraqi

and coalition officials taking place daily. Some observers predict that a civil war is not far off. With this in mind, there have been calls to postpone the elections.

I respectfully disagree.

It's not that I'm optimistic about the results — I'm not — but I firmly believe that to bring our troops home, the administration needs a true exit strategy, and this election provides the symbolic transfer of power that will pave the way for that goal.

I opposed this war from the start and have called for disengagement of our troops from Iraq. However, I support the president in his in-

sistence that the election go forward.

We cannot simply cut and run. The Bush doctrine of pre-emption and unilateralism has backed us into a corner. The situation we find ourselves in is best summed up by a Greek proverb that Thomas Jefferson famously quoted when he said: "But as it is, we have the wolf by the ears and we can neither hold him

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nor safely let him go."

The president has said that we will leave if the Iraqi government asks us to go. He knows the Iraqi government will ask us to go if he desires. If the United States sticks with a departure timetable, Iraqi authorities will have the best incentive to meet benchmarks we set together. But if we stick with the administration's vague notion that U.S. troops should leave once Iraq is "stable," the Iraqi government can postpone the painful task of taking responsibility for its own destiny, and our troops will continue to pay the price.

This exasperating reality is the quagmire into which we are sending brave Americans to die. Nearly 1,400 U.S. troops have lost their lives thus far, and more than 10,000 have been wounded. The enormous cost in human life — both our soldiers' lives and those of innocent Iraqis — is staggering. The inability of the administration to level with the American people, our

troops, especially members of the Guard, reservists and their families is disheartening.

This tragic loss of life is further compounded by the cost of the war, which is more than \$200 billion and counting

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— unpaid for and part of an unprecedented deficit of nearly half a trillion dollars, adding to a skyrocketing national debt that must be borne by, among others, our men and women fighting overseas.

This war was driven by an ideological belief that has now exceeded our military grasp. It is led by an administration unwilling to admit a mistake

while spouting hollow rhetoric under the guise of patriotism designed to limit dissent and mask the reality of a mission gone bad. This election gives them a path forward.

Although our troops have performed remarkably, the strategy created by the civilian Defense Department and the White House was poorly coordinated and predicated on overly optimistic assumptions, misinformation, poor intelligence and outright lies from Ahmad Chalabi.

It is everyone's hope that the elections are a success, no matter how limited. On each trip I make to Bethesda Naval Hospital to visit our wounded, I know what every mother and father knows in their heart: We need a resolution to end the mission and bring home the troops. We need to face facts about the state of affairs in Iraq, and the administration needs to be honest with the American people. The situation in which we find ourselves does not have to be drawn out even further — we must not be in denial and make the same mistakes we made in Vietnam and suffer the same awful consequences.